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SHIP BUILDING AT THE SAN GABRIEL MISSION.

BY FRANK J. POLLEY.

[Read March 4, 1895.]

The fact that a ship was constructed at San Gabriel and carried in pieces to San Pedro; there placed in position and properly launched, is generally overlooked in treating of the achievements by the mission fathers. The historians have almost nothing on the subject and the data left by old pioneers is distressingly meagre. The construction of this ship marked the beginning of a new era in Southern California's prosperity which later on many circumstances conspired to defeat.

The first ship ever constructed on the southern shores of the Pacific was built by the Jesuit Father Ugarte in 1719. A ship was needed for the coast survey. After traveling many miles in the mountains suitable timber was found at last. Its transportation to the coast presented difficulties considered almost insurmountable. Father Ugarte's ship for a time became a matter for joke. But his energy overcame all obstacles. He had the timber felled, hewn and dragged to the coast and there built a ship which he named the Triumph of the Cross. The recollection of this fact may have stimulated the priests of San Gabriel to a like achievement.

Father Sanchez was a priest of great executive ability. When called to San Gabriel the lowering clouds of secularization were in the sky, but the revenues and assets of the mission were still prosperous and in the present, the probabilities of the future were dismissed. The lands were well tilled, the stock had multiplied and the trade with coasting vessels had furnished a handsome profit for all concerned. The energy and executive ability of Father Salvidea, his predecessor in office, had given an impetus to the work at the San Gabriel Mission and Father Sanchez, if he was desirous of perpetuating his own fame, must have realized that it would be incumbent upon him to divide the honors by the origination of some plan that would direct a new channel of wealth to the mission coffers. The mission fathers by means of the coasting vessels and travelers, kept well informed of occurrences on the coast. There were large numbers of otter and they knew the business had already proven profitable at Clemente and Catalina Islands. In the journals of Father Peña and Crespi the Indians are described as dressing in the skins of the otter and the pelts seem to have been put to many uses by

the Indians. The old adobe owned by the mission fathers and situated on the San Pedro bluffs was then in a good state of preservation and was used as a warehouse. It would be a source of great financial gain to the mission if the warehouse could be filled with otter skins instead of hides and tallow. There was no question but that the supply of otter would not last long. Reports were current at Monterey and in the North of the reckless slaughtering of these valuable animals. About this time a small vessel had been built and launched near Santa Barbara for the purpose of engaging in this trade. Little is known of her. Practical shipwrights were exceedingly scarce on the Pacific Coast in the thirties. The Indians had no knowledge of the details of ship building. Many Indians were then on the main land who had formerly lived upon the islands. The early missionaries report them as possessing large canoes capable of holding a dozen or more, but though clever in many things they had not yet acquired the skill of constructing sailing vessels.

For nearly a year the matter of the ship must have been in abeyance at the San Gabriel Mission. Joseph Chapman was then living there doing odd jobs as a man of all work. He, alone, of all men there, seems to have been the only practical shipwright. After a remarkable career and an adventurous life he had apparently settled down to steady employment. He was married; had a family, and was especially fitted for the work in hand.

It is said a launch was constructed in 1824 at San Francisco by an Englishman. The Russians certainly brought their own boats and what the Californians had used previous to this time came from Mexico or were purchased from the Russians and Americans.

Los Angeles had a population of 1300 and ranked among the first towns in the state, but as a rule the people did not belong to the working class. The Spanish colonists did not come here with a desire to work. The Indians could do only menial tasks and the soldiers very seldom engaged in labor. The Indians regarded both them and their guns with a superstitious reverence and it was hardly consistent with their role of superior beings to be seen engaged in daily toil. Dana's indictment of the California people is well known to be true. He says—"as a rule they were shiftless; they had grapes and paid high prices for Boston wines; they had hides and paid exorbitantly for shoes made from California skins that had twice been around the Horn." Robinson and, in fact, all other travelers, bear testimony to substantially the same facts.

At the missions the priests produced some remarkable results though in the line of manufactured articles but little of the Indian work has come to us of any special value. The American element was just making itself felt at this time. They were slowly settling on large tracts of land, were marrying into good families, and becoming of social and political importance. Joseph

Chapman, especially, seems to have fallen into good hands. From the time of his capture among the Bouchard pirates he had had friends in the state. He was a favorite with Father Sanchez who kept him quite regularly employed at the mission posts. Being a sailor he was a jack of all trades and was the very man for the priest's purposes. Father Sanchez was, doubtless, stirred to renewed activity from the fact that shortly before this there had been much talk about secularization. The trading instinct in him had led to some peculiar transactions; as the result of which he had been charged with smuggling. Though not convicted he had felt chagrined and had asked for a pass to retire from the country only to be refused. All these matters made his tenure at the mission of uncertain duration; and meanwhile the slaughter of the otter meant their ultimate extermination; the small vessel built at Santa Barbara also meant opposition to the plans of the friar so from now on the project of a vessel to be used in otter hunting was pushed with all his characteristic energy.

Timber was available in the mountains. The priests were thoroughly conversant with every cañon and trail for miles around the mission. Indians were to be had in plenty for the labor of transportation, but it was important that the vessel when built should be manned by men experienced both as mariners and sailors. Prior Laughlan and Yount, who had recently come to Los Angeles, answered these requirements. The exact place from which the timbers were taken will, perhaps, always be a source of uncertainty. Tradition points to a number of such, but strict investigation is apt to dispel all theories. It was certainly a custom to cut large sticks of timbers in the mountains, haul them overland and by turning the logs from time to time partially smooth and plane them during the hauling. Some of the rafters in the San Fernando Mission were treated in this manner. It is also on record that on Christmas eve in 1828 or 9 the brig Danube of New York, with a party of twenty-eight men, dragged her anchors in San Pedro bay during a south-easter and went ashore a total wreck. The party were taken to the house of Antonio Rocha and doubtless some of these men were available for the project of Father Sanchez.

It is certain that Samuel Prentice afterwards was in the otter hunting scheme and at his death was buried on Catalina Island. Some of the older fishermen now engaged at the Island remember the otter hunting in the olden times, but the grave of Prentice is lost forever. The timbers and derelict of the brig Danube must have afforded material for Chapman and Father Sanchez. The most careful gleaning of history, memoirs and manuscripts will only yield vague rumors and isolated facts about the San Gabriel ship yard but it seems certain that the vessel was not completed for more than a year, and perhaps two, after this storm. It is also in evidence that parties from Santa Barbara visited San Pedro to gather material from the wreck.

Merchants who visited the coast in these years noted the schooner's construction and the wide spread interest it excited. Such an event would, doubtless, attract much attention. The men were a nation of riders who thought nothing of a trip from Santa Barbara to Los Angeles and doubtless there was not an idle cavalier in Southern California who had not interested himself in the acts of these Americans and the project of the Mission fathers.

Invitations were issued long before the expected launch took place. There is nothing in the California records about the license to trade; but it was a necessary prerequisite and if the difficulties experienced by those in Santa Barbara be a criterion, it dispels the mysterious delay in the construction and launching of the San Gabriel ship. The elaborate studies by Blackman in relation to the new institution of Spain have opened up a maze of errors, difficulties and senseless rules by which Spain crippled the domestic commerce of her colonies. Smuggling was fast becoming so fashionable that stringent measures were necessary for protection of revenue.

As before intimated Father Sanchez being there under the ban of suspicion and former associations, doubtless experienced all the vexatious trials and delays of the law. At Santa Barbara the governor stopped work on the vessel until a proper permit was obtained. After several weeks' delay this was granted; then more delays, and by the end of the year a license to trade was issued but with the restriction that it be only for one year, six men to constitute a crew and more than one-half of these must be Mexicans. Before even this permit could be granted it required several months' correspondence with the authorities in Mexico.

Our historians seem to have over-looked data for Father Sanchez' vessel. Bancroft does not know her name and in the three places she is mentioned the tonnage is given as 6, 60 and 99 tons. Col. Warner has about three lines devoted to its history. It is all the more surprising since it was a cause celebra as the first vessel of any importance to be launched in the Southern California waters. Father Sanchez did not live to see the vessel launched. Mission troubles bore heavily upon the old priest and his sudden death cut short his ambitious plans, but as the time drew near for the launch the vessel was taken to pieces and great carts were prepared for its overland transportation to the water. Invitations had been sent far and wide to guests. The carts used by the Californians were drawn by oxen and were rough, heavily made structures. The ordinary ones in use at the time consisted of a frame or platform about five feet by twelve set on a rough axle and a pair of wheels. These wheels were sawn from a solid block of wood two or three feet in diameter. They were about ten inches in thickness at the centre and tapered down to about five inches at the rim where they were sometimes bound with tires but more generally not. The yoke was fastened across the foreheads of the animals by means of raw-hide thongs placed below the horns. There were

generally outriders to such carts. The men mounted their fiery horses, swung their reatas and beat and urged on the oxen with loud cries. Probably in this manner the long, dusty miles from San Gabriel to the port were accomplished. The details of the launch rest upon the authority of Alfred Robinson who had received an invitation and was present. In his "Life in California" he says: "A launch was to take place at San Pedro—the second vessel ever constructed in California. She was a schooner of about 60 tons that had been entirely framed at San Gabriel and fitted for subsequent completion at San Pedro. Every piece of timber had been fitted thirty miles from the place and brought down to the beach on carts. She was called the Guadalupe in honor of the patron saint of Mexico and as the affair was considered quite an important era in the history of the country many were invited from far and near to witness it.

"Her builder was a Yankee named Chapman who had served his apprenticeship with a Boston ship builder. He was one of a piratical cruiser that attacked Monterey at which time he was taken prisoner and had lived in the country ever since. From his long residence he had acquired a mongrel language. English, Spanish and Indian being so mingled in his speech that it was difficult to understand him. Although illiterate, his ingenuity and honest deportment had acquired for him the esteem of the Californians and a connection in marriage with one of the first families of the country. Father Sanchez of San Gabriel used to say Chapman could get more work out of the Indians in his unintelligible tongue than all the mayor domos put together. I was present on one occasion when he wished to dispatch an Indian to the beach at San Pedro with his ox wagon, charging him to return as soon as possible. His directions ran somewhat in this manner: "Ventura! Vamos! trae los bueyes go down to the playa and come back as quick as you can puede."

San Pedro today is not so lively a place as it must have been at the time of this launch. On all important occasions crowds flocked to the beach, and Robinson describes the busy scenes both on sea and shore when vessels were in the harbor,—Boats flying to an anchor; men, women and children crowding the docks, lining the bluffs and all taking in the general excitement; there were loaded crafts along the beach; men and Indians busily employed in their various duties; groups of individuals seated around little bon-fires upon the ground; there were horsemen rocing their animals over the plains. Thus the hours were spent, some arriving and some departing. Until long after sundown the dusty road leading across the plain to Los Angeles appeared a living panorama. After the launch had been successfully accomplished the vessel made a number of trips for otter.

Col. Warner saw her many times lying in the roadstead, but it is not known where she was finally wrecked, although the event happened only a few years after her launch.

The festivities at San Pedro and the first vessel of any importance ever constructed on the California coast, have passed away, and a cause celebre is now almost a myth in our local annals. The facts supposed to be known are: The vessel was named *Guadaloupe*; she was owned by the San Gabriel mission; built under the supervision of Joseph Chapman; constructed at San Gabriel, and about 1831 launched at San Pedro. Everything connected with this curious event in our forgotten local annals, when severally studied, is strongly dramatic. The advent of Chapman from Bouchard's pirate ship; his subsequent marriage, naturalization and employment as utility man at the mission; the wreck of the brig "*Danube*;" the struggle of Father Sanchez with mission troubles and ship building; the enlisting of the American pioneers in the labor of construction; the cartage to the beach and festivities among the populace; and, last scene of all, the wreck of the boat.

Every one of the pioneers, from Chapman to Prentice, made his mark on the history of our country, and, although the historians have sadly neglected this abortive attempt at domestic shipping, it is certain that its many scenes lingered long in the memories of our old pioneers, and by piecing together such narratives as are accessible, the faint outline of the story has been presented in the hopes that later research and more general interest in these matters may lead to the discovery of live matter with which to rehabilitate this antique historic skeleton.